**Ananias Passes the Test!**

By Pastor Ricky Kurth

After a teen-aged boy got a zero on his final exam, he said to his teacher, “I don’t think I deserve this zero.” To which the teacher replied, “I don’t think you deserve it either, but that’s the lowest grade I can give you!” Then there was the man who was taking the exam to become a police officer, and one of the questions was: “What would you do if you had to arrest your own mother?” He wisely answered: “I’d call for backup!”

 In our last study we met a man named Ananias, and as we return to Acts 9, we’re about to see the Lord Jesus Christ ask him to do something that is going to test his faith in a way that just might be the *hardest* test of faith in all the Bible:

 **“And there was a certain disciple at Damascus, named Ananias; and to him said the Lord in a vision, Ananias. And he said, Behold, I am here, Lord.**

**“And the Lord said unto him, Arise, and go into the street which is called Straight, and enquire in the house of Judas for one called Saul, of Tarsus: for, behold, he prayeth,**

 **“And hath seen in a vision a man named Ananias coming in, and putting his hand on him, that he might receive his sight.**

 **“Then Ananias answered, Lord, I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints at Jerusalem:**

 **“And here he hath authority from the chief priests to bind all that call on thy name.**

 **“But the Lord said unto him, Go thy way: for he is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel:**

 **“For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake.**

**“And Ananias went his way, and entered into the house; and putting his hands on him said, Brother Saul, the Lord, even Jesus, that appeared unto thee in the way as thou camest, hath sent me, that thou mightest receive thy sight, and be filled with the Holy Ghost” (Acts 9:10-17).**

 Now if you have forgotten what a mean hombre Saul of Tarsus was, look how he later described his life in those days:

**“I persecuted this way *unto the death,* binding and delivering into prisons both men and women” (Acts 22:4).**

In our last study we saw that the “way” that Saul persecuted was made up of people who followed the Lord Jesus, who said,

**“*I am the way,* the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by Me” (John 14:6).**

And Saul was persecuting the Lord’s followers *“unto the death.”* We learn more about his murderous career if we eavesdrop on a prayer he prayed after he got saved:

 **“I said, Lord, they know that *I imprisoned and beat in every synagogue them that believed on Thee:* And when the blood of Thy martyr Stephen was shed, I also was standing by, and consenting unto his death, and kept the raiment of them that slew him” (Acts 22:19,20).**

And Saul wasn’t just persecuting God’s people *physically,* he went after them *spiritually* as well:

**“…many of the saints did I shut up in prison…and when they were put to death, I gave my voice against them. And I punished them oft in every synagogue, *and compelled them to blaspheme;* and being exceedingly mad against them, I persecuted them even unto strange cities” (Acts 26:10,11).**

Saul wasn’t just beating and imprisoning and slaying the Lord’s followers, he was also persecuting them spiritually *by compelling them to blaspheme the Lord Jesus.* That’s what the world calls adding insult to injury.

 Who knows, maybe that’s how he decided how to punish people. If you blasphemed the Lord, he’d let you off with the “warning” of a beating, or put you in jail for awhile. If you *wouldn’t* blaspheme the Lord, he’d send you to heaven to *be* with the Lord.

 But to get to the point: when Ananias told the Lord, “I’ve heard by many how much evil he hath done to Thy saints at Jerusalem” (v.13), that shows that Ananias knew *exactly* what the Lord was asking him to do in going to see this murderous monster. It was like asking a Jewish ophthalmologist in 1944 to drop in on Hitler and help him regain his sight so he could *kill you* after you helped him, and then continue to exterminate the rest of your race.

 But as we said in the title of this message, *Ananias passed the test!* He went to help Saul just like the Lord asked.

 Now if you’re wondering if *you* could pass a test like that, let me let you in on his secret. Look how Paul described him in Acts 22:12:

 **“…Ananias, *a devout man according to the law,* having a good report of all the Jews which dwelt there.”**

That word “devout” is the adjective form of the word *devoted.* And “devoted” means to take something that belongs to you and say, “This belongs to the Lord,” as we see in the Bible’s first use of this word:

**“…if a man shall sanctify unto the Lord *some part of a field of his possession*…it…shall be holy unto the Lord, *as a field devoted;* the possession thereof shall be the priest's” (Leviticus 27:16-21).**

That’s talking about a field that you own, and can do whatever you want with it, and devoting it to the Lord to do whatever *He* wants with it. In this case, the Lord took the land and gave His priests a place to live. When a man did that, when he devoted his field to the Lord, that made it a *devout* field.

 But when you talk about a devout *man* like Ananias, that’s a man who knows that his *life* is his to do whatever he wants with it, but instead he devotes his life to the Lord to do whatever *He* wants with it.

 And that’s the secret of Ananias’ success. That’s how he was able to pass the biggest test of faith in his life. Before it came, he’d already decided that his life was the Lord’s to do whatever He wanted with it. So when this severe test of his faith came, he passed it with flying colors.

 Now how about you? I don’t care how old you are, the biggest test of faith in *your* life might still be ahead of you. Now think about that for a moment! Think about all the hard test of faith that you’ve already endured. And then think about how your biggest test of faith might be just around the corner. And whether you get a zero on that test or pass it with flying colors like Ananias depends on whether you devote yourself to the Lord *now,* before your faith is tested.

Our faith gets tested when the Lord asks *us* to do hard things, like accept the betrayal of a friend. That happened to a grace pastor with whom I was speaking recently. Our faith is tested when we have to suffer the loss of a child, and in countless other ways. When things like that happen, don’t you want to answer like Ananias did: “Behold, I am here, Lord.” Don’t you want to be able to pass the test of losses like that be remembering that God’s grace is sufficient even in times of such severity? If so, you may want to pause and talk to the Lord about it before you read on.

In our last study we saw the Lord *save* this homicidal maniac and tell him to continue on his journey to Damascus. And here in verse 11 we learn that the Lord guided him in some way to the house of a man named Judas, who obviously wasn’t the same Judas who betrayed the Lord and took his own life a short time later. Judas was the Greek form of the Hebrew name *Judah,* who was the father of one of the twelve tribes of Israel. That made Judah or Judas a very popular name for Jews.

And if you think about it, even more kudos have to go out to Judas than what I’ve been saying should go to Ananias. I mean, at least when the Lord told Ananias, “Go see the leader of the holocaust,” He told him, “He’s at the house of a believer named Judas.” He probably reasoned with himself, “Well, if he’s at the house of a believer and hasn’t *killed* the believer, maybe I’ll survive this experience.” With Judas, the Lord just told him, “Guess who’s coming to dinner—the guy who’s on his way to kill believers like you!”

This Judas lived on Straight Street that great street—at least that’s what Frank Sinatra might call it if Damascus was a toddlin’ town like Chicago. I can’t be sure of this, but I’m told that city streets in those days were usually so crooked and windy that if a street was straight they would generally name it so.

But notice that the Lord told Ananias that Saul was *praying.* That’s probably what you did after you got saved as well—and I hope you never stopped! I say that because sometimes when grace believers learn that God’s not answering prayers like He used to, in miraculous, supernatural ways, that sometimes they cease praying! God is still answering prayer. He just does it by working through His Word working in the hearts and lives of His people—which isn’t any less miraculous when you consider how selfish and wicked even believers can be! I’ve seen some *amazing* answers to prayer in my life, and you will do if you do what Paul says and “pray without ceasing” (I Thessalonians 5:17). The reason Paul had to write that is that he knew grace believers tend to quit praying.

But you can’t give up on prayer and still claim you are following Paul as he followed Christ. There are so many prayers of Paul recorded in the Scriptures that whole books have been written about them. So if you want to be like Paul, you have to pray! If you only pray when you’re in trouble, *you’re in trouble.*

Now if you stop and think about it, the Lord was really putting Ananias on the spot. Did you notice that the Lord didn’t tell him, “I told Saul that *some guy* was coming to restore his sight”? He said, “I told Saul that *a guy named Ananias* is coming to restore his sight” That means he was making Ananias an offer he couldn’t refuse! If he did, the Lord couldn’t send some guy named George to him.

Now that’s different than how the Lord asks *us* to do things. He doesn’t say, “I told the people of Illinois that Pastor Ricky Kurth would be my ambassador.” If He did, and I refused to be His ambassador, He couldn’t send anyone else! He calls on *all of us* to be His ambassadors! And if we all refuse Him, then He doesn’t get represented in the cities and towns in which we live!

You see, God’s not going to send you to people if you don’t want to go, like He was doing with Philip under the dispensation of the law the kingdom, as recently as just a few verses earlier:

**“…the Spirit of the Lord caught away Philip, that the eunuch saw him no more: and he went on his way rejoicing.**

**“But Philip was found at Azotus…”**

Under the old dispensation that ended just shortly beforehand, God was still whisking Philip around and setting him down in areas where He knew men wanted to hear the gospel—whether Philip wanted to go or not! We saw that this kind of thing happened to the prophet Ezekiel so often that he got a little hot under the collar about it. But God is not going to do that if *you* don’t want to go and be His ambassador to people. There’s been a dispensational change!

Now I’ve been talking about how great it is that Ananias passed the test of his faith so gloriously, but there’s something else great about him—at least something that a goof like me thinks is great. And that is: before he obeyed the Lord and went to see Saul, he talked to the Lord about it first and voiced his objections to the Lord’s request to pay a visit to a man who might kill him! I personally don’t believe he was being unspiritual in doing that, he was just being *human.*

And when you’re reading God’s Word and He asks you to do something that you find hard to do, you’re not being unspiritual to voice your objections and tell Him why you’d rather not. God understands. It’s one of the reasons He invented prayer in the first place, so you could tell Him how you feel about the things He says to you in His Word. The only reason to feel bad is if you don’t do what Ananias ended up doing and obey the Lord.

Now Ananias must have known how important this mission was when the Lord called Saul “a chosen vessel.” You know what a vessel is, don’t you? A vessel is something you put things in to carry those things from one place to another. God put your blood in blood vessels, for example. Those vessels carry life-giving blood and oxygen to the furthest extremities of your body so you can keep living on the green side of the dirt.

But the Lord was calling Saul to be a vessel to carry something infinitely more important than something that can only give *life.* He chose Saul to carry *His name,* something that could give *eternal* life—to three groups of people: the Gentiles, kings, and the people of Israel.

Now when He mentioned the Gentiles first, that means the Lord was calling Saul to a different kind of ministry than that to which He called the twelve apostles. Speaking of their call we read,

**“And when He had called unto Him His twelve disciples, He…commanded them, saying, *Go not into the way of the Gentiles*…but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 10:1,5,6).**

Now you know that the Lord didn’t say that because He didn’t *like* Gentiles. He said that because he planned to use the people of Israel to *reach* the Gentiles.

 Do you know what that means? It means that in the Old Testament *the people of Israel* were God’s vessel to bear His name to the Gentiles. But when they refused to *be* His vessel, and lived in rebellion against Him instead, God allowed them to be *conquered* by the Gentiles and swallowed up by them, allowing them to be carried away captive into the land of the Gentiles. As the prophet Hosea put it,

**“*Israel is swallowed up:* now shall they be among the Gentiles *as a vessel wherein is no pleasure”* (Hosea 8:8).**

Did you catch the irony there? God sent the people of Israel among the Gentiles to be His ambassadors, but when they refused Him, He sent them among the Gentiles to be His *prisoners.* He permitted them to remain in captivity in Babylon for 70 years. If they’d have obeyed Him, they could have been a vessel God was pleased with. When they disobeyed Him instead, they became “a vessel wherein is no pleasure.”

 God eventually allowed His people to be released from their captivity, as we know. But when He tried to use the apostles to reach the Gentiles in the New Testament, they responded by rocking Stephen to sleep.

 And that was the last straw. When that happened, God made *Saul* His vessel to bear His name before the Gentiles—and kings, as we’ll see later in Acts.

 But when verse 15 mentions the Jews *last,* that means that God is now reaching us Gentiles *first,* and then using *us* as His vessel to carry His name *to the Jews,* and the eternal life that comes with His name.

 But God’s plan to use Paul to reach the Gentiles was different from His plan to use the Jews to do it in many respects, one of which we see when the Lord told Ananias that He’d show Saul how great things he must suffer for His name. You see, when God used *the Jews* to reach the Gentiles, any suffering that *they* endured was of their own making. Remember, God told them that as long as they obeyed Him that He would make sure they didn’t have to suffer things like bad health and bad crops, and He wouldn’t allow them to suffer defeat at the hands of their enemies either.

 But that’s *not* what the Lord told Saul! In fact, He told him the very opposite. He planned to tell him *up front* that he would have to suffer “great” things for His name’s sake. If I were Paul, I think I’d have asked the Lord, “How come you’re not calling me like you called Moses? When You called him, you told him how much *Pharaoh* would have to suffer!”

 By the way, this tells you that the Lord could never get a job as a recruiter for the military, or a headhunter for any of our major corporations. Such men usually try to accentuate the *benefits* of working for your company. They don’t lead with things like, “Yeah, you’ll be working long hours for lousy pay, suffering in a hazardous work environment with a bossy supervisor and crabby coworkers.” But the Lord led Saul with a promise of how much he’d have to suffer for Him.

 And if you want to serve the Lord in the dispensation of grace, the Lord can’t offer you anything different than what He offered Saul. But to borrow a phrase from the Peace Corp, it’s the toughest job you’ll ever love.

 And the part you just might love best about serving the Lord as a grace believer is not being disappointed with God when your life turns out to be full of suffering as Paul’s was, instead of filled with health and wealth like the prosperity preachers who don’t rightly divide the Word promise.

 If you knew what Paul knew about suffering, you’d know what a *privilege* it is to suffer all the things we have to suffer. Look what Paul said about his sufferings:

**“I Paul am made a minister; Who now rejoice *in my sufferings for you,* and fill up *that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ* in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church” (Colossians 1:23,24).**

Paul knew he was suffering the things he was suffering *for the sake of the Body of Christ,* getting the truth of the new dispensation to those who needed to hear it. And he knew he was *also* suffering *for the Lord.* If the Lord were here getting that truth to us, *He’d* have to suffer all of the things that life throws at us. But He’s not here, so you and I get to follow in Paul’s sacred footsteps and suffer those things. But taking the Lord’s suffering is the least we can do, after He took *our* suffering on the cross. Suffering like that is a *privilege!*

But the first thing the Lord had to do with Saul was restore the eyesight that he lost when he was blinded by the light of the Lord’s glory, and fill him with the Holy Ghost (Acts 9:17). Now the filling of the Holy Ghost back then was different than what it is today. We’ve already seen that it empowered the disciples to do at Pentecost:

**“…they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, *and began to speak with other tongues…and…sick folks…were healed every one”* (Acts 2:4; 5:15,16).**

Paul could do those things too, and he could *also* do something we see him doing when he met up with a sorcerer in Acts 13:9-11:

**“Then Saul, (who also is called Paul,) *filled with the Holy Ghost,* set his eyes on him. And said…*thou shalt be blind,* not seeing the sun for a season. *And immediately there fell on him a mist and a darkness.”***

As you can see, the filling of the Spirit also gave Paul the kind of *destructive* power that it gave Peter in Acts 5 when he struck Ananias and Saphira dead. But today, the filling of the Spirit doesn’t enable us to do any of those things. Today it empowers us to do the kinds of things that Paul described to the Ephesians:

**“…*be filled with the Spirit*…Giving thanks always for all things…Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands…Children, obey your parents…Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters” (Ephesians 5:18—6:5).**

What you’re reading there is a description of what Spirit-filled believers look like in the dispensation of grace. Those are the kinds of things that being filled with the Holy Ghost results in today.

 If you are thinking that things like that don’t demonstrate the power of God as much as healing, or striking men dead, I would respectfully disagree. To heal the sick God only had to overcome the laws of nature. To make a man thankful for “all things” even when things aren’t going his way, God has to overcome the laws of *human* nature. It’s not natural for men to be thankful when their life isn’t going like they’d like it to go. It’s not natural for wives to be submissive. It’s not natural for children and slaves to want to obey their parents and masters. So when you as a believer manage to pull it off, it demonstrates the power of God in ways that are *far* more powerful than speaking in tongues.

 All right, let’s see what happened to Saul after Ananias told him he’d come to heal his blindness:

 **“And immediately there fell from his eyes as it had been scales: and he received sight forthwith, and arose, and was baptized” (Acts 9:18).**

Now as you may know, water baptism in the Bible was *for salvation,* as Peter made clear on the day of Pentecost:

**“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ *for the remission of sins,* and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:38).**

But Saul was already saved before Ananias baptized him! How do I know? Well, did you notice in our last study that when the Lord told Saul who He was, Saul responded by calling Him “Lord” (Acts 9:5,6)? Well, what did Paul say about that later in I Corinthians 12:3?

**“…no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, *but by the Holy Ghost.”***

That means that Saul got the Spirit that saved him *before* he got *the gift* of the Spirit that enabled him to do things like speak in tongues. And the only place he could have received that Spirit would have been on the road to Damascus.

 So why then did Ananais tell him to be baptized, if not to be saved? Well, the new program where men could be saved *without* water baptism wasn’t revealed to Ananias, it was revealed to Paul later on! Ananias was just being faithful to the only gospel message he knew, the one Peter preached at Pentecost.

 Did you notice how Ananias healed Saul by laying his hands on him (Acts 9:17)? Did you ever wonder where he got the idea to do that? He got it from the Lord when He predicted,

**“…*they shall lay hands on the sick,* and they shall recover” (Mark 16:18).**

But if that’s the case, and it evidently *was* the case, why wouldn’t Ananias preach the same gospel that the Lord instructed them to preach a few verses earlier in that passage, that of:

**“He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved” (Mark 16:16).**

If *you’re* not saved, you need to know that you don’t have to be baptized to be saved today in the dispensation of grace. Nor do you have to be catechized, circumcised, or even homogenized, as my first pastor used to say, Pastor Jeff Farrell. You just need to believe that the Lord Jesus Christ paid for all of your sins when He *died* for them on Calvary’s cross, and He would never ask *you* to make *additional* payments for your sin by being good, or by giving money to the church, or in any other way.

 The last verse of our text paints a beautiful picture that is almost too wonderful to believe when viewed against the dark backdrop of Saul’s murderous activities just a short while before:

 **“And when he had received meat, he was strengthened. Then was Saul certain days with the disciples which were at Damascus” (Acts 9:19).**

Here we see Saul kicking back with the very followers of Christ he had come to slay! Doesn’t that remind you of Isaiah’s description of the kingdom of heaven on earth:

**“The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb…” (Isaiah 11:6).**

 Of course, atheists and Bible skeptics look at verses like that and say, “That could never happen, for it’s the nature of a wolf to *eat* lambs!” But as we know, God will *change* the nature of the members of His animal kingdom once He establishes the kingdom. Skeptics also look at Saul dwelling with the very saints he had come to slaughter and say, “That could never happen either!” But God changed Saul’s murderous nature just as surely as He’ll change the nature of the wolf in the kingdom.

 You know what that means, don’t you? It means when skeptics look at blacks and whites and policemen and how they seem to be at each other’s throats these days and think, “Thy’ll *never* be able to dwell together in peace and love and harmony,” it’s only because they don’t know what you know. You know that the answer to all that mess is *the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.* They know nothing about the *miracle* that God can work in the hearts of men.

 Of course, part of the reason for that is that we’re not being the ambassadors for Christ that He has called us to be. What do you say we close this study by agreeing to pray about that?